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ABSTRACT

The transition to formal schooling is a landmark event for millions of children, but transition practices commonly used may not be well-suited to the needs of children and families. This research and policy brief, a quarterly synthesis of issues addressed by investigators and affiliates of the National Center for Early Development and Learning, focuses on transition activities and policies. The brief examines issues surrounding transition to kindergarten and how U.S. schools support this transition. The brief encourages policy makers to broaden the focus on children's readiness skills to one encompassing the settings that influence those skills--family, peer group, preschool, and school and suggests needed policy changes and factors in need of further research. The brief includes a fact sheet on the transition to kindergarten summarizing the findings of the larger report. (Contains 18 references.) (HTH)

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Transition to Kindergarten. Early Childhood Research and Policy Briefs.

Volume 2, Number 2, Winter 2002

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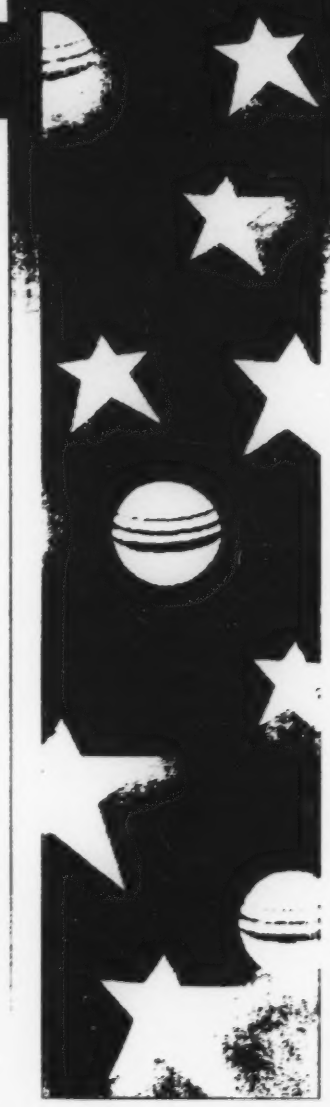

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National Center for Early Development & Learning

Briefs

Winter 2002 Vol 2

A synthesis of current issues by investigators and affiliates of the National Center for Early Development & Learning prepared for the National Institute on Early Childhood Development & Education

Transition to Kindergarten

THE TRANSITION TO formal schooling is a landmark event for millions of children, families, and educators. But research by the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) and other investigators indicates that the transition practices commonly used in schools may not be well suited to the needs of children and families.

What are the issues?

There are several reasons why the transition to kindergarten and the early grades of school is important.

First, the early elementary years, particularly kindergarten, are important in establishing competencies critical to children's school success and achievement. These competencies involve child social and academic skills as well as parents' involvement in the education of their children.

Second, early childhood learning environments are quite different from traditional elementary school classroom settings. Early childhood settings provide support for both children and families, recognizing the very clear developmental differences between preschool-age children and school-age children. The entrance to kindergarten is a point of considerable change and transition for families, children, and staff. It is precisely these differences that transition practices attempt to bridge and overcome.

Third, increasingly large amounts of public funds are now dedicated to educating young children with the intent of boosting their chances for success in elementary school and beyond. It is imperative to understand and shape the conditions under which public funds can be best used.

In addition, children's experiences prior to kindergarten are different now than they were a generation ago. Kindergarten classes are larger and children have to deal with more children and more adults than in pre-school. There is increasing emphasis on formal instruction and the acquisition of skills. Maturity demands are greater, such as sitting still for longer periods of time and self-control and attention. Children usually ride the bus without parents and with bigger children for the first time. More children now attend pre-school or are enrolled in non-familial care settings that give them experiences with peers and classroom-like environments.

How do US schools support the transition to kindergarten?

A national survey of nearly 3,600 kindergarten teachers in late 1996 by NCEDL confirmed what had been learned in a more limited survey in 1992. Of the 23 transition practices listed on the survey, the majority of teachers reported using practices such as:

- **sending a letter to parents after the beginning of school.**
- **holding an open house after school starts.**
- **sending a brochure home after school starts.**

The least commonly reported practices included:

(see SUPPORT page 2)

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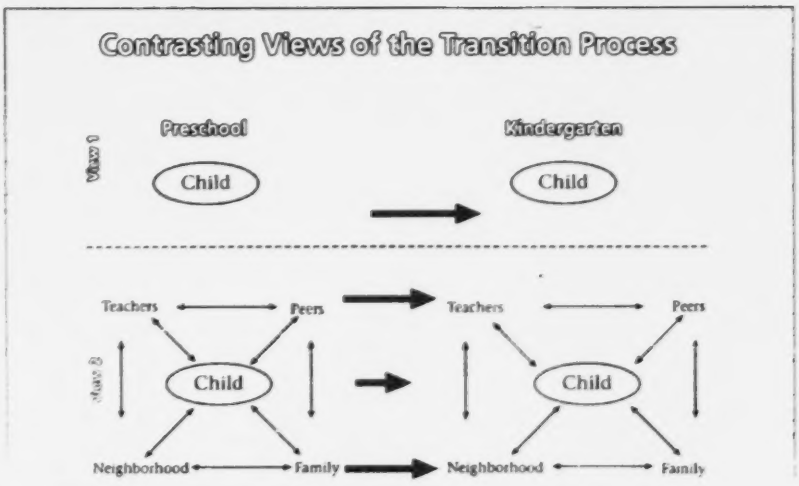
How should we think about transition?

THE FIRST NATIONAL Educational Goal, "by the Year 2000 all children will start school ready to learn," emphasizes not only child-related skills that promote school success, but also the importance of family, school, and community-level factors (e.g., access to high-quality preschools) that support the development of children's competencies. School readiness is not a property of a child (View 1 in the figure at right) but is a product of interactions among key settings in which the child participates (View 2).

In our model to the right, the transition to school for a

(see TRANSITION page 3)



Transition has to be understood in terms of the settings that contribute to child development (e.g., family, classroom, community) and the connections among these settings (e.g., family-school relationships) at any given time and across time.

SUPPORT continued from page 1

- **calling the child before or after school starts.**
- **visiting the child's home or preschool program(s).**

These results paint a very clear picture of the typical transition experience for children and families. They are most likely to receive a form letter telling them when schools starts, what to bring, and that open house is scheduled for some time near the end of September. They are least likely to get a personal call or personalized information before school starts.

The most commonly used transition practices by the nations' kindergarten teachers and elementary schools, when contrasted with the policies and practices recommended by *"Ready Schools,"* published by the National Education Goals Panel (1997), can be characterized as low intensity, group-oriented practices that do little to involve families and build partnerships prior to entering school. In short, schools do too little too late to connect with children and families.

Importantly for policymakers, we also asked these teachers to identify barriers to what they thought would be better or more useful transition practices than the ones they currently employed. Teachers identified a number of administrative barriers such as receiving class lists too late to contact families before school, absence of a plan for developing transition policy and practices in their district, and a lack of school system support for effective transition. In addition, they noted the lack of funds to support the time they needed in the summer to conduct good transition practices.

NCEDL staff are working closely with teachers and school staff to improve the transition to school in several communities across the country. For example, staff meet with parents and with teachers to discuss classroom expectations. They work to gain the trust of families by home visits and accompany the family on school visits. Staff coordinate meetings between the preschool teacher and elementary school staff which are reported to be very helpful. Staff take materials from school to home to demonstrate how to use them with the child. In this work we have learned that families and schools strongly value good transition experiences that link them together **before** the child enters school.

When given the opportunity to think about, plan, and implement high-quality transition practices, school staff have been willing and enthusiastic and families have responded well. Partnerships between families and schools can be established even before school starts. In addition, local preschool staff can meet with staff from elementary schools and begin discussions of how to make expectations and learning experiences similar across preschool and kindergarten, thus improving the quality of educational experiences for the child in the classroom setting. These collaborations highlight the importance of policies that support transition planning among all stakeholders.

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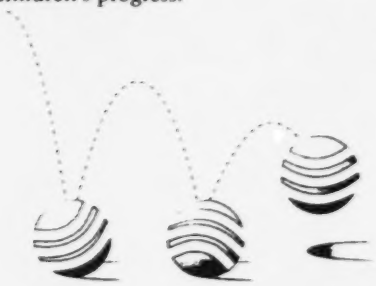
given child is not just a matter of that child getting on the bus and going to school on the first day. A serious problem in nearly all policies and practices related to the transition to school has been the sole focus on children's skills (e.g., readiness) instead of a broader view that encompasses the settings that influence those skills. Transition policies and practices that focus solely on children's skills most often result in undue attention to the assessment of readiness.

There are two problems with approaching school transition as a function of a child's skills and abilities. First, a child's skills and abilities are very limited predictors of early school success. Understanding how well a child will adapt to kindergarten requires attention to factors beyond just characteristics of children.

Second, the transition period involves not only how children adjust to kindergarten but also how families and schools interact and cooperate. It is not just the child who makes a transition. Families are also involved in the transition, and to best use family resources for a child's education requires attention to how schools and families can form partnerships during this transition period.

Good policy and good practice have to build on a solid conceptual foundation that recognizes that young children's success in school is intertwined with their experiences in multiple settings: family, peer group, preschool, and school and that this transition period is a critical time for building partnerships between schools and families that can support children's progress.



What policy changes are needed?

- **Strengthen bonds between preschools and elementary schools.** Policies are needed that foster communication between preschools and elementary schools. Important topics for discussion include consistency in expectations and curriculum across programs. Such policies would greatly reduce the large shifts that occur in classroom quality, experiences and expectations for children between preschool and elementary school.

- **Require transition planning teams in localities.** Such policies would mandate the formation of transition planning teams in localities involving school personnel, preschool staff, families, agency workers and community leaders. This collaboration would focus on better informing the public about preschool and early school opportunities for children, enhancing learning experiences for young children, and the development and implementation of transition practices that smooth the shifts between preschool, home, and school.

- **Strengthen bonds between families and schools.** Require teacher-training in building partnerships with families, especially those from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. These and other professional development programs must be based on adult learning principles and the best available research about child development and learning.

- **Provide high quality kindergarten classroom experiences for children.** Because all children enter formal schooling in kindergarten, policies must be developed and enacted that insure that kindergarten programs are among the highest quality programs in a school. These policies should focus on lowering student-staff ratios, strengthening relationships between teachers and children, and teachers and parents, ensuring productive use of time in order to nurture children's learning, and providing young children with the opportunity to be taught by well-educated and well-trained staff.

What do we need to study?

- **Localities that provide high quality transition practices in their communities.** Such a large-scale study would document the policies and procedures used in transition planning and implementation. This "best practices in transition" study would provide a rich set of descriptions that can give rise to core principles to guide transition planning and implementation across the country in the years to come.

(see STUDY page 4)

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- **How kindergarten classroom environments contribute to the quality of transitions for children.** Such a study could greatly enhance our knowledge about classroom practices that support successful transition into the critically important early years of elementary school.

- **Survey kindergarten teachers and teachers-in-training.** This would help to better understand their knowledge and experience in transition planning, and results would provide much-needed information for teacher development, both inservice and preservice programs.

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Web sites of interest

National Center for Early Development & Learning: **www.ncedl.org**
National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education: **www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/**

The primary authors of this brief are Robert Pianta of the University of Virginia and Martha Cox of UNC-CH. In addition to UNC-CH and the University of Virginia, the other NCEDL partner is the University of California at Los Angeles. *Early Childhood Research and Policy Briefs* are produced by the National Center for Early Development & Learning, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, PR/Award # R307A60004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, US Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the position of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education **www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/**, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

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Early Childhood Research & Policy Briefs

Fact Sheet

National Center for
Early Development & Learning
University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

Winter 2002 Vol 2, #2

Transition to Kindergarten

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The most commonly used transition practices by the nations' kindergarten teachers and elementary schools, when contrasted with the policies and practices recommended in *"Ready Schools"* published by the National Education Goals Panel (1997), can be characterized very simply as too little, too late. Commonly used transition activities are low intensity, group-oriented practices that do little to involve families and build partnerships prior to entering school. In short, schools wait too long and do too little to connect with children and families.

Importantly for policymakers, we also asked these teachers to identify barriers to what they thought would be better or more useful transition practices than the ones they currently employed. Teachers identified a number of administrative barriers such as receiving class lists too late to contact families before school, absence of a plan for developing transition policy and practices in their district, and a lack of school system support for effective transition. In addition they noted the lack of funds to support the time they needed in the summer to conduct good transition practices.

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- **Provide high quality kindergarten classroom experiences for children.** Because all children in the population enter formal schooling in kindergarten, policies must be developed and enacted that insure that kindergarten programs are among the highest quality programs in a school.

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